

## Shi'a Seminaries in Iraq and Iran

*By Rami Yelda*

The Arabian Peninsula is the cradle of Islam but it was in Iraq where Shi'ism was born. Six of the twelve Shi'a imams are buried in Iraq and their shrines have been and still are venerated by the Faithful. Also, it is in these shrines, particularly the one in Najaf, that religious schools called *howzat* have been centers of Shi'a scholarship for centuries.

Soon after the passing away of Prophet Mohammad in 632, a schism developed between the two main Muslim factions--a schism that has endured to present. A group called *Ahl al- Sunnah* "People of the Path" started feuding with Ali, cousin and son-in-law of Mohammad and with his followers called *Shi'at al-Ali* "Party of Ali." The major issue in the conflict was the caliphate (succession of the Prophet). Initially, Ali was thrice bypassed from succession but eventually, in 656, he became the Fourth Caliph. Ali's Caliphate was short. In 661, while praying in a mosque in Kufa (Iraq) he was stabbed by a poisoned sword and killed. His followers buried him in a barren land a few miles from Kufa. It was around this grave that a town called Najaf grew up. With his death, Ali became the first martyr and the first Imam of Shi'as.

After Ali's assassination, internecine quarrels and more blood-letting followed. In 680, on the second day of the lunar month of Moharram, Hoseyn, one of Ali's seven sons, challenged a Sunni Umayyad army of 4,000 with 72 of his devoted followers in Karbala, a desert oasis close to Kufa. The battle, as expected, lasted from early morning to mid-afternoon. Hoseyn and all his men were killed and buried there. The martyrdom of Hoseyn, the Third Imam of Shi'as, is known as Ashura and the date is commemorated with melancholic ceremonies and self-flagellations every year. Hasan (the Second Imam and Hoseyn's older brother) was not in Karbala during the conflict. The Ummayyads offered him the governorship of Mecca, and he accepted.

Martyrdom of more imams was to follow in Iraq. The Seventh and Ninth Imams were killed in Kazimayn in 802 and 834 and were buried there. The Tenth and Eleventh Imams were killed in Samarra in 868 and in 873 and were buried in the al-Askari Mosque. (This is the same Mosque that was attacked by Sunnis militia twice recently.) The Twelfth Imam, the Mahdi, however, was spared from martyrdom. In 873 while still a teenager; he disappeared in a well adjacent to the al-Askari mosque and is expected to return in the future.

Arabs do not make a production when burying their dead. The corpse is soon buried in a grave deep enough to protect it from wild animals and to prevent any odor reaching the surface. When placing the corpse in the grave, it is laid on the right side with the head turned towards *qibla* (Mecca). A mound of earth or sand is

built above it and a stone is placed to distinguish the position of the head. The six imams were laid to rest in a similar manner.

Najaf, Karbala, Kazymain and Samarra, being the burial sites of the six imams and the disappearance place of the Mahdi, are the most revered shrines of Shi'as after Mecca and Medina. These 'shrine cities' are collectively called, *atabat aliyat* or *atabat al-moqadassah* (the elevated, or, the sacred thresholds.) They are the secondary pilgrimage (*ziyaret*) destinations of shi'as and because of their sanctity, are off-limit to non-believers.

With the conversion of more Arab tribes to Shi'ism, the *atabat* became important pilgrimage sites. The humble graves of the six imams were incorporated into modest mosques with unpaved prayer halls, covered with small and ordinary mud-brick domes. During the Sunni Caliphate and later after 1638, during the [Sunni] Ottoman Turkish rule, the Shi'ite centers did not enjoy much support from the governments. It was in the 16<sup>th</sup> century that Ismail, the Safavid Shah of Persia, (1501-1524) ordered all his subjects (who were predominantly Sunnis at that time), to convert to Shi'ism en masse. Following the conversion, the subsequent Safavid shahs commissioned their court architects, artists, calligraphers and craftsmen to embellish the *atabats'* four non-descript shrines. Iranians added golden grilles to the saints' tombs, adorned the mosque entrances with blue tiles, added exquisite calligraphy to the walls and transformed the humble mosques into spectacular works of Islamic art. The beautifying trend continued during the Qajar rule (1779-1925) and it was then that the domes of the four shrines were gilded.

With the new mosques, additional pilgrims from Iran, Afghanistan, and India came to visit. Lacking any financial assistance from the ruling Sunnis, the *atabat* could generate only modest income from pilgrims as part of their alms: *zakat* and *khoms* (one-fifth of the income.) Pilgrims, therefore, became important sources of revenue for the shrines. Selling religious mementos and souvenirs became a major source of revenue. Karbala's soil molded into a seal (*mohr*) is still a favorite item sold to the Faithful to touch it with their head while prostrating. Still another choice item given to the sick or to women in labor is the elixir made by adding water to dust from the saints' grilles and Karbala's soil. Internment permit fees add to the revenue of the shrine cities. Najaf's cemetery, the *Wadi al-Salaam* (the Valley of Peace) is the world's largest cemetery and is the ultimate resting place of Shi'as, some coming as far as Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Unhappy with their Sunni rulers, more desert Arabs converted to Shi'ism in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. With the new converts and also improved finances generated by pilgrimage, the *hawzat* in the *atabat*, especially the *howza* (singular of *hawzat*) of Najaf, became the principal centers of Shi'as' higher education. Many scholars (*ulema*) from the rest of Iraq, Bahrain and other Arabic speaking countries arrived to teach in such prestigious schools. They were followed by the Iranian *ulema* that joined in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. With the gathering of diverse groups of gifted scholars, the *howzat* became the foremost centers of Shi'as' higher education. Together with

the new interest and to the dismay of Persians, Najaf became the unofficial epicenter of Shi'ism.

The curriculum and mode of teaching in the *hawzat* that started in the 11<sup>th</sup> century has not changed much. The teaching methods were adopted from the Jewish *yeshivas* that were already transformed into the Sunni-Islamic *madrasa* system. There was (and still is) heavy emphasis on memorization and oral recitation. Most of the teachings are held either in the modest buildings housing the schools, in mosques, in the shrines' courtyards or in the teachers' (*mujtaheds*) homes. The learning process is divided into three stages and it takes six to twelve years for a *talebeh* (student) to be eligible for *ejtehad* (independent judgment). In the initial stage, the student is required to study the Qur'an, the Hadith, Arabic grammar (*sarf wa-nahw*) (not an easy subject for the non-Arab student unfamiliar with Arabic). The other topics are those dealing with jurisprudence (*feqh*), principles of jurisprudence (*osul al-feqh*), and exegesis of the Qur'an (*tafsir*). In the next stage, the *talebeh* is required to study logic (*manteq*), rhetoric, ethics (*akhlagh*); history (*tarikh*), literature and poetry. In the advanced stage, Greek (Aristotelian) philosophy (*falsafeh*) and theosophy (*hekma*) are taught. During the learning process the *talebeh* is expected to dispute his views about studied subjects with his fellow students and teachers. Upon the culmination of the studied subjects, the student must prepare a treatise on a specific subject and present it to his teacher. If accepted, he is given an *ejazeh* (permission) to render independent judgment. A simple graduation ceremony is then held. If the graduate is a *seyyed* (direct descendant of the Prophet) he will be given a coveted black turban to wear; otherwise, he will be receive a white one. The graduates will then don an *abba*--the loose fitting robe woven with light-brown or black camel hair. The *talebeh* who is unwilling to continue the full curriculum, can leave after a year or two and become a low-ranking cleric and earn a meager living by presiding over the usual religious duties such as officiating in marriages, funerals, preaching in village mosques or performing elegies (*nouheh*) during the holy month of Moharram when commemorating Ashura and the martyrdom of Hoseyn.

Shi'as became the majority in Iraq during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Becoming a majority under the Ottoman Turks and later Iraqi Sunnis did not bode well. In 1963, the secular but Sunni Baathists took over Iraq. To appease the Shah, Sadaam Hussein, not a friend of Shi'as, allowed the exiled Khomeini to live in Najaf from 1965 to 1978, until he was expelled to France. After the Iranian Revolution, when Khomeini was in Iran and securely in power, he started meddling in the internal affairs of Iraq by trying to export his theocratic regime there. Saddam responded by arresting, torturing and executing some of Iraq's prominent Shi'a leaders. He also expelled five thousand Iraqi-Iranians, the majority of whom lived in the *atabat*. A second wave of persecution and forced ejection of Iraqi-Iranians occurred during the calamitous Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988. Following the war and the decrease in the number of *ulema* and Iranian Shi'as, Najaf lost its revered status as the capital of Shi'ism.

For centuries, Iranians had attempted, in vain, to challenge Najaf and replace it with Qom. As hard as they tried, Iranian clerics reluctantly accepted that Najaf was a far more prestigious center of religious studies compared with Qom. Any Iranian *mojtahed* worth his salt was expected to study in Najaf. Saddam Hussein did a favor to the Iranians when he executed or forced many of its scholars to leave Iraq. Benefiting from the arrival of the newly deported *ulema*, Qom, holding the remains of Reza, the Eighth Imam's, eight-year old sister, Fatemeh Massumeh's (the Innocent), superseded Najaf and has now become *the* capital of Shi'ism. (Another boost to Qom has been the building of the sumptuous Jamakaran Mosque where the Mahdi is supposed to return from its well soon. According to the latest reports from the Iranian Government, three million pilgrims visited Jamkaran last year).

Mashhad is where Imam Reza's sumptuous shrine is located. But despite having its own *howzeh*, it has always been overshadowed by Qom. The following are some of the better known seminaries of Qom.

Madrasa of Imam Khomeini, (now called Imam Khomeini Research and Educational Institute.) Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader, is its president. It is a luxurious school with an unlimited budget. It has all the modern amenities such as a state-of-the art kitchen and cafeteria, a swimming pool, exercise rooms, a large conference hall and spacious classrooms and dormitories. Initially it was meant to be a seminary for foreign students but recently Iranian students have enrolled in it too. The curriculum has been intensified to help students graduate in two years. Here, the foreign students are well pampered and in addition to the usual stipends and bonuses, are given free tickets to fly Homa (Iranian National Airline) in Iran, the Middle East and Europe.

Feyzieh: This is the most famous seminary is the *howzeh* of Qom. It was here Khomeini was one of its teachers and it was in this school where he started his campaign against the Shah--a campaign that would eventually lead to the Iranian Revolution.

Other well-known schools are:

Hojatiyeh: Most of Iran's present leaders, including Khamenei, are its alumni

Mar'ashi: A school famous for its well-stocked library and high-level of scholarship.

Haghani: The first seminary to add English, computer literacy courses, and Western sciences to its curriculum. Ayatollah Mezbah-Yazdi, Ahmadinejad's mentor, is an alumnus.

Madinat ol-Elm: (The City of Knowledge), is directed by Sharestani, Ayatollah Ali Sistasni's son-in-law.

Ghayuri: A large and elaborate school, built by a rich merchant who had made a fortune by wheeling and dealing with the clerical regime.

Other schools in Qom are: Dar ol-Shafa (next to Feyzieh), Golpayegani, Momenieh, Razavieh, Madrassahs of Mirza Hashem Amoli, Shirazi, Alwandieh, Emam Hasan Mojtaba, Al-Hadi . . .

Religious education in Qom is the same as that in Najaf. Here, too, students can study two or three years then leave to make a living. If willing, a student can complete the full course and become a *mujtahed* (jurist) and engage in theological reasoning. The gifted continue their studies and with time will become *hojjat ol-Islam*, or proof of Islam. The elite of [Iranian] Shi'ism are the *ayatallah* "Signs of God." (ayatollah is the Persian spelling and pronunciation.) To achieve such an honorific title, a *hojjat ol-Islam*, after teaching, publishing, and attracting alms paying followers, and also after gaining the respect for his personal integrity, must be so named by the hierarchy of the *howzeh*. Few of the ayatollahs advance to the foremost level of reverence called *al-ozma* (grand) or, *marj'a taqleed* (source of emulation.)

Graduates of theological schools in Iraq are called "*sheiks*." In Iran they are called "*molah*" which is the Persian pronunciation of Arabic *maula*, meaning "master." The common (and derogatory) name of clerics in Iran is "*akhund*" (short for *agah khund*, meaning the mister who recites.) But, when trying to be respectful, Iranians usually refer to their clerics as "*agha*" (mister).

Prior to the Iranian Revolution the number of clerics in Iran was about forty thousand; now the number is estimated to have surpassed seven hundred thousand! With the clerics holding complete control of all financial, governmental and military institutions, having a religious degree has become prestigious. There is heated competition and jockeying to get accepted to one of Qom's seminaries since graduating from one of these schools guarantees a secure future.

During the Shah's rule, there were approximately one thousand foreign seminarians in Qom. The majority were Shi'a Arabs from Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf states and Palestine. There were also students from other Muslim, non-Arab countries such as, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Kashmir, Turkey, Republic of Azerbaijan, Indonesia, Bosnia, Malaysia . . . These students had come to study Shi'ism and learn about Persian culture and language. Many were granted scholarships by the Iranian Government, or were subsidized by their own governments. During their stay, some had married Iranian women and after completing their studies, had returned to their countries with their wives. These graduates had become worthy representatives of Iran and Shi'ism.

After the Revolution, as Khomeini had decreed, the Iranian Government started an ambitious and well-funded campaign to export its Revolution and Shi'ism to the world. Part of the plan was also to confront the United States and Iran's other archenemy-- Wahabism. Iranians had found Europe to be saturated with millions of Sunni Turks and Sunni North Africans. The U.S. and Canada) together with Latin America and Africa were targeted as new territories to exploit. To achieve their

goals, Iranian officials started making friendly overtures to African and Latin American leaders. After establishing diplomatic channels, religious centers were set up to proselytize and sent the new converts to Qom.

To meet Khomeini's goals, judging by the Government's budget reports, so far, nineteen billion dollars have been spent. Twelve thousand foreign born seminarians have graduated from Qom and at present there are thirteen hundred foreigners studying there. To accommodate the surge in the foreign students, the government has established several special schools where instructions are given in Arabic, Persian and English. Foreign seminarians are given free room and board and a \$300 to \$500 monthly stipend. After graduation, students are given presents such as hand-woven silk rugs and a bonus of \$3,000 to \$5,000.

Part of the Government's plan is also to train Iranian clerics to travel to foreign countries and under clerical guise, proselytize and act as secret agents and, if needed, as terrorists. During the summer break some of the seminarians are sent to attend a special terrorist training school in Ali Abad, close to Qom. It is here where the Hizballah fighters are instructed. Also, it is here where those who blew up the Marine barracks in Beirut, the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia and the two Jewish centers in Buenos Aires were schooled.

Many issues arise when over 10,000 young men are clustered in a small city like Qom. Female companionship is one of the primary ones. With the sinking of the Iranian economy, many young women are forced to leave their homes and resort to prostitution. Qom is where many have gravitated. Brothels, supposedly being non-existent in the holy city, are doing brisk business here. The *talebehs* could either go to the brothels or use coded phone numbers and call the prostitutes to visit them in their *hojrehs* (students' cells.)

Contract marriages (*sighe* in Iran, *mut'a*, in Arab lands) are also practiced by the seminarians in Qom. These "marriages" are a source of income for women and the mullahs who officiate. According to this system, a contract is drafted that stipulates the "marriage" to last from an hour to ninety years. The "bride" and the mullah are paid and once the time has expired, the wife is free to leave. It is estimated in Qom, that there are now at least 2,000 women working as *sighes*.

Smoking opium has always been a favorite pastime in Iran. Growing poppies was banned during the last Shah's reign and that ban still holds. With Afghanistan producing record amounts of opium every year, and with the long and porous borders between the two countries, there is no shortage of it in Iran. Puffing opium in the opium dens in Qom or in the seminarian *hojrehs* is a favorite pastime of the *talebehs*.

In the *howzeh* of Qom, as in other male-dominated social or religious locals in the rest of the world, homosexual activities are not unheard of.

After reviewing the curriculum of the Shi'a clerical schools, it is evident that the main subjects studied deal with the interpretation of Islamic law. The premise is that the Hidden Imam will reappear someday and it is the duty of all clerics to substitute for him until that time. *It goes without saying that all the subjects studied in the howzeh of Qom deal with the return of a mysterious saint and have no relevance in running a modern state.* It is Iranians' misfortune that their ancient country is now run by a bunch of *akhunds* with no concept or training in disciplines of statecraft. As Iran sinks deeper and deeper into economic collapse, and with the *akhunds'* full control of the state, their chances to transform their country into a Western-style, secular democracy in the near future appears slim.